

Wimbledon 21 Westcliff 19

Westcliffs resources were further stretched for this top of the table clash between the 2nd placed visitors and longtime but recently displaced leaders Wimbledon, both teams were level on 65 match points. With five of the previous weeks match squad unavailable the return of Merrick, Marsh and Maloney was welcome but further call ups for Macintyre and Roskams were necessary. It was a typical late January afternoon, the conditions grim and chilly with intermittent drizzle but for the most part an entertaining and absorbing clash was not adversely affected.

The home team caught Westcliff napping straight from the kick off, recycling several times with pace and penetration. The Westcliff defence infringed but playing advantage and with good continuity in offload and support the home team got in behind to score in just the second minute. The try was converted and a 7-0 lead established, the visitors kept their nerve regrouped and went on the attack. The contest was robust and intense but rarely spiteful as both sides took turns in testing each others resolve and organization. As possession went to and froe adventure and enterprise from Westcliff combined with quality offloading and link up play released Jim Smith to score under the posts to level the scores after 13 minutes. The next 20 minutes continued in the same vein, but Westcliff were looking more likely to break the deadlock with a couple of opportunities created that should have been taken but were not. As they continued to press a Wimbledon player was adjudged to have deliberately knocked on in the red zone and earned a 10-minute breather. Westcliff were quick to make the extra man pay with Smith barging over after a concerted series of drives at the home try line. Bannister converted and Westcliff went into the break 7-14 up.

Although restored to 15 shortly after the restart Wimbledon remained on the back foot and Smith was on hand once more to score shortly thereafter. Now leading 7-19 Westcliff were in the ascendancy and were not greatly worried by their hosts as the third quarter played out. However, as the last 20 minutes began there was a shift in momentum as the visitors suffered three setbacks in rapid succession. The loss of hooker Billy Marrant and no 8 Jim Smith both big ball carriers and influential players was compounded by a yellow card for Rob Smith in the centre. The card was a little harsh but entirely consistent with the one awarded earlier so there was no cause for complaint, but it was a pivotal moment as Wimbledon scored a converted try straight away and returned with intent very quickly. Pressure and numbers paid off and they got over again in the left hand corner just a few minutes later and a well struck touchline conversion gave them a 2-point lead with 10 minutes or so to go. Westcliff attempted to shrug off the setback and their misfortune, and were able to drive back upfield and assert pressure. A couple of half breaks and nearly moments came and went until a contentious penalty and 10-metre walk allowed Wimbledon to clear upfield and the games final few minutes played out with the two teams tackling each other to a stand still in the middle of the pitch.

A big game and a big opportunity that slipped frustratingly from our grasp at the death, nevertheless we are not displeased with the way we played or the contribution of the players as individuals and as a team. The effort and commitment were total, we played

good rugby when we were able to and defended superbly when we had to. The game was lost in a 10-minute spell when a few things went against us, Wimbledon capitalized on that opportunity well and should be applauded for that, but we know that it is a game we could and should have won. We can't do anything about that now and attention will turn to our next game, but first we will embrace a very welcome week off to regroup and hopefully overcome a few lingering injury issues.

Bannister, Marsh, Reynolds, R Smith, Merrick, Whiting, H Marrant, Brown, B Marrant, Lane, Scogings, Anderson-Brown, Binstead, Hatton, J Smith REP Macintyre, Maloney, Roskams